



Provisional edition

Friday 24 April 2026, morning

Official report of debates

Opening of the sitting No 18

Free debate

Mr Marko PAVIĆ (Croatia, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Good morning, everybody.

The sitting is open.

I remind members that in order to be registered for the sitting, you should insert your badge when you take your seat and keep it inserted for at least 30 seconds.

You should also insert your badge in order to speak or vote. To request the floor please press the "request" button just once.

I also remind the Assembly that members who have not submitted an annual declaration of interest are required to start any intervention with the oral declaration of interests under Paragraph 20 of the Code of Conduct for members of the Parliamentary Assembly.

Our first business this morning is the free debate.

I remind members that this debate is for topics not already on the agenda agreed by the Assembly.

Speaking time will be limited to 3 minutes. Speakers should start by identifying the topic they wish to raise.

First, we start with the speakers on behalf of the political groups, and I call first Mr Malte KAUFMANN on behalf of the European Conservatives, Patriots & Affiliates.

The floor is yours for 3 minutes.

Thank you.

Mr Malte KAUFMANN (Germany, ECPA, Spokesperson for the group): Mr Chairman,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you very much for giving me the floor.

In this report:

1. Speeches in English, French, German and Italian are reported in full in English.
2. Speeches in other languages are summarised from the interpretation and indicated by an asterisk (*).
3. Speeches in German and Italian are available in full on the Assembly's website.
4. The text of the amendments is available at the document centre and on the Assembly's website. Only oral amendments or oral sub-amendments are reproduced in the report of debates.
5. Corrections should be handed in at Room 1081 not later than 24 hours after the report has been published.

I would like to remind you that, this week, when we are discussing democracy and human rights in Strasbourg, a mayor has once again been arrested in one of the Council of Europe member states. I am talking about Türkiye. A mayor from a district in Istanbul. This means that 21 mayors from the largest opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), have now been imprisoned in Türkiye. This is a very worrying development and I call on Türkiye to foster political competition, to stop weakening the opposition to such an extent by simply putting mayors in prison. Furthermore, there are now efforts in Türkiye to move towards an outright ban on the CHP. The public prosecutor in Türkiye, in Istanbul, is trying to initiate a ban procedure. That is also not part of democratic competition.

Ladies and gentlemen, however, it is not just in Türkiye that the opposition is being put under pressure, that the opposition is being fought to such an extent. There are also similar endeavours in my own country, in Germany. Thank goodness, for the time being, no mayor is in custody. But nonetheless, there are also efforts in Germany to ban the largest opposition force, the AfD, the Alternative for Germany. The Social Democratic Party, for example, recently voted unanimously in favour of a ban in a members' vote at a delegates' party conference. Yet the AfD is now the strongest party in the polls with 27%, the most popular party among young people, and in some eastern German states we are already at 38% to 40%. We are fully committed to the free democratic basic order. We are a patriotic, conservative party. In all the years in which the so-called Office for the Protection of the Constitution in Germany has tried to gather evidence against us, nothing has come to light that could in any way justify a ban.

That is why I am also calling on political players in the various federal states in Germany, but also at federal level, to put an end to this intimidation, these efforts to ban us, and ensure political competition, democratic competition. This includes elections, it also means that the opposition is granted its rights, for example in parliament, which are also being denied to some extent.

Thank you very much. This is an important subject for us to address.

Mr Marko PAVIĆ (Croatia, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

I call now Mr Damien COTTIER on behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe. The floor is yours.

Mr Damien COTTIER (Switzerland, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mister President.

We are living in a period of multiple crises: geopolitical crises, economic and financial crises, of course security crises and a climate crisis. And this is obviously a time for concern, but like all crises, it can also be a time for opportunity. I am convinced, and so is my group, the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, that in this period our liberal democracies can assert themselves, but to do so they must work together. And they must work on three fundamental principles.

Firstly, we must strengthen our economies within our countries, and make it easier for people – young people in particular – to integrate themselves into society and into the workplace. To achieve this, we need competitive economies. There are methods that have been put forward at European Union level, reports such as those by Mr Mario DRAGHI and Mr Enrico LETTA. We must avoid overregulation. We must encourage investment, we must encourage innovation, we must strengthen our economies within our own countries.

The second thing we must do is strengthen our security, the internal security of our countries. This is what our citizens want; they want to live in a safe society. But also, of course, we must strengthen our external security, because Europe is under pressure, because there is a threat on our doorstep, and because, consequently, we must fight against this threat. We owe it to our citizens, and this obviously involves co-operation efforts as well as rearmament efforts.

And the third thing that we must do, that our liberal democracies must do together, is to strengthen their co-operation. And here, the multilateral framework, in particular that of the Council of Europe, but more generally the multilateral organisations that are under pressure, must be strengthened and they must be more effective. To be more effective, they need to work together and we had a good example of this this week with a side-event organised by the Swiss delegation. We were able to discover an organisation called the *Geneva Science and Diplomacy Anticipator* (GESDA), which is a Geneva-based forecaster of new technologies and new technological disruptions, and which we, as members of the Council of Europe, could draw on to anticipate future technological disruptions more effectively and use them to the benefit of our citizens, for the common good.

And so co-operation, for example, between the multilateral centres in Strasbourg and those in Geneva, is something we need to do, and we also need to have more collaboration between countries, between liberal democracies, for example with countries like Japan, like Canada, like the countries of South America that want to do so. We already have collaboration. I think that we need to strengthen this with these countries and that this is an activity that our organisation, the Council of Europe, will have to work on over the next few years. There are opportunities and we owe it to our young people to seize them.

Thank you, Mister President.

Mr Marko PAVIĆ (Croatia, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

I call now Mr Sam RUSHWORTH on behalf of the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group.

The floor is yours.

Mr Sam RUSHWORTH (United Kingdom, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you.

And I wish to address the same topic. In the village of Witton Park, which is on the banks of the River Wear, where I represent, there's a statue to four brothers, George, James, Thomas and Roland Bradford, who fought in the First World War. Only one of them returned home, while two won the Victoria Cross. Just a few decades later, the Durham Light Infantry, in which the Bradfords had served, fought in almost every major campaign of the Second World War, including Dunkirk. These young pitmen and railwaymen who fought for their country knew that they were also fighting for something even bigger: victory over fascism. Victory for the freedoms, and the human rights and democracy that we all cherish. And soon after that war, the Council of Europe was established to safeguard those values, leading to an era of unprecedented human flourishing. That does not mean to say the end of all challenges and disagreements, but that we approach those challenges through an international rules-based order.

Recently, Prime Minister Mark CARNEY talked about there being a rupture in the world order and an era of great power rivalry. Surely that only increases the imperative that we, as friendly European nations, stand together and collaborate together, as we have done this week on issues such as violence against women and girls that stain all our societies, or online harms and global threats, issues like managing asylum, issues like the death penalty.

And yet, two parties of the right in the United Kingdom – the Conservatives and Reform UK – have it in their manifesto to pull us out of this place. Reform UK, if they win power, would also rip up our domestic Equality Act and our Human Rights Act. And I've said this in this place before, that that will come not through the bullet, but through the ballot box, because we see across Europe, people turning to the ideas of the far right.

One of the reasons for this, I believe, is the algorithms that are driving people towards more extreme content. That's something that we in this place need to get a grip on. This Wild West of the internet, the echo chambers that people create for themselves. We've all met these people who used to post on their Facebook pages about animals or their latest holiday to Spain, and these days just post a daily diatribe of far-right messages because they're being radicalised through the internet. We all know what a collective challenge this is. And it's a challenge that, if we don't address it, countries like the United Kingdom will no longer be here, and that rules-based order will continue to erode. And I fear that we may be heading to a very bad place, so I intend to bring something back to this place next time, on those issues.

Mr Marko PAVIĆ (Croatia, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much. I call now Ms Albana VOKSHI, on behalf of the Group of the European People's Party.

The floor is yours.

Ms Albana VOKSHI (Albania, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you.

President,

Dear colleagues,

Today, I want to speak about one of the biggest challenges we are facing in the Western Balkans. There is a structural crisis that is reshaping our societies. People are leaving. Young people are leaving massively.

According to Eurostat, in the last decade, over 3.1 million citizens from the Western Balkans have migrated to the European Union (EU) member countries.

Around 2 million have received residence permits, confirming that migration is not temporary, it is permanent. Initially, many permits were linked to family reunification, lately, it has been a rapid increase in work-related permits, showing a clear shift toward economic migration.

More than 400 000 asylum applications have been registered and over 680 000 individuals have entered the EU illegally, showing the scale of pressure to leave at any cost. More than half of these irregular cases come from Albania. It is a clear correlation between democratic decline, authoritarian tendencies and high migration levels.

What is particularly alarming is that around 70% of migrants are under the age of 35. This confirms that migration is disproportionately affecting the youngest, most active, and most productive segment of our societies.

This is no longer an economic phenomenon. It reflects declining trust in institutions, corruption, a lack of meritocracy, and exclusion from decision-making in many of our countries. Migration has become a form of "exit" from systems that no longer inspire trust.

According to the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), fertility rates are well below replacement level. Several countries have lost up to 30% of their population, while Albania has lost over 40% in the last decade.

The consequences are profound. Economically, the region is losing GDP annually, around 3%, along with critical human capital, innovation, and productivity. Socially, it leads to depopulation, ageing societies, labour shortages, and growing pressure on pension and healthcare systems. Politically, it erodes democratic participation, weakens civic engagement, and undermines accountability.

It is sad to see our countries becoming older, smaller, weaker and emptier.

That is why, this is an urgent issue we need to deal with, with more policies for better jobs and wages, support for families, investment in education and innovation and incentives for the return of the diaspora. And this is not enough because the roots are political.

So, we need to pay more attention and pressure states for real rule of law, a credible fight against corruption, merit-based systems, strong and independent institutions, and above all, the real inclusion of young people in decision-making. We must make our countries again younger, more dynamic, and full of life.

This is a priority for the Group of the European People's Party (EPP) as well. Because we believe young people should not be forced to leave in order to live with dignity.

That is why the EPP places a strong focus on governance, opportunity, and democratic participation.

Thank you.

Mr Marko PAVIĆ (Croatia, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much. Now we go to the list of individual speakers. The first is Mr Namık TAN from Türkiye.

The floor is yours.

Mr Namık TAN (Türkiye, SOC): Mister President,

Dear colleagues,

I would like to speak today about values at the heart of a just and prosperous society: freedom, democracy, and human rights – and about a man whose journey embodies the struggle for all three: Mr Ekrem İMAMOĞLU.

Mr Ekrem İMAMOĞLU's political story is not just about winning elections; it is about reaffirming the power of the people. His historic victory in the Istanbul mayoral elections, not once but three times, proved that citizens will defend their democratic will when under threat. He has reminded us that democracy is a living process, sustained by the courage of the people and the integrity of leaders.

Today, however, Mr Ekrem İMAMOĞLU sits behind bars – unlawfully imprisoned, not for a crime, but for his unwavering commitment to the people. This is not merely a blow to one man, it is a message to every citizen who believes in justice and the ballot box.

In an attempt to further delegitimise him, his diploma has been arbitrarily cancelled and his family's company unjustly taken over. These actions are not signs of strength but of fear – fear of democracy, fear of accountability, and fear of the people's voice.

Yet, history shows that moments of injustice often become turning points.

When political figures like Mr Ekrem İMAMOĞLU are silenced, society does not become quieter – its conscience grows louder. His wrongful imprisonment, the cancellation of his achievements, and the seizure of his family's livelihood are not signs that the struggle is lost; they show it is entering a more determined phase.

Every unjust act sparks solidarity. Every attempt to erase his voice inspires thousands more to speak. And every heavy-handed action reminds the world why defending democracy is not an option, but a duty.

That is why international support is not just important – it is essential. When democratic rights are threatened anywhere, they are threatened everywhere. The world cannot stand silent while political freedom is suffocated. Every democratic nation, every international institution and every human rights defender must raise their voice.

Thank you.

Mr Marko PAVIĆ (Croatia, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much. Before we proceed, we have a 'blue card' procedure.

Mr Malte KAUFMANN, you have asked to take the floor to ask the question to another member on behalf of your group in accordance with Article 37.4 of the Rules of Procedure.

I remind you that you must ask a question, not make a speech. The question must be addressed to a member who does not belong to your political group. It must directly relate to the speech made by that member and on the subject of the debate. You will have 30 seconds to ask it, and the member to whom the question is addressed will have 30 seconds to respond.

You have the floor for 30 seconds.

Mr Malte KAUFMANN (Germany, ECPA): Thank you very much. I was thinking a little bit about what Mr Sam RUSHWORTH said from the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group.

You talked about the rise of the right in Europe and that's a normal democratic procedure. But then you linked it to echo chambers on social media. But in social media, there are also echo chambers for the green ideology, for the socialists. You know, every party has its echo chambers.

What do you want to do? Do you want to limit free speech? Do you want to limit free press? What do you want to bring into our Parliament?

Mr Marko PAVIĆ (Croatia, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much. Your question was to Mr Sam RUSHWORTH.

Do you want to respond? You have 30 seconds to respond.

Mr Sam RUSHWORTH (United Kingdom, SOC): You're right that there are indeed echo chambers of both left and right. And what algorithms do is drive people to the extremes of both.

And we've seen in the UK, anti-Semitism on the left, we've seen Islamophobia on the right. But something that's significant about the algorithms is that the people that control the tech companies that are driving what we, what we all consume, are powerful, very wealthy people, part of the global elite.

And that's not free speech. It's not free speech when people don't get an equal opportunity to be heard and when people are believing in things that are simply not true because of the extremism of the content that they're receiving.

Mr Marko PAVIĆ (Croatia, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much. We now proceed to the list of speakers. The next is Mr Hayk MAMIJANYAN from Armenia.

The floor is yours.

Mr Hayk MAMIJANYAN (Armenia, EPP/CD): Honourable Chair,

Dear colleagues,

I will speak today about genocides. With the deepest respect for all victims of such crimes, I will focus on Armenians, as today, 24 April, marks its 111th anniversary of the Armenian genocide in the Ottoman Empire. And because the people of Armenia delegated me to do so.

I am not the first, and certainly will not be the last, member of parliament to speak about the Armenian genocide in this Chamber. Some of you may feel that this topic has been raised too often. 1.5 million Armenians were killed at the beginning of the 20th century. And yes, it was a massacre, a tragedy. One that happened more than a century ago. What can be done now? Today, you may think, the world has the tools to prevent such crimes: international law, institutions, mechanisms.

You are mistaken, dear colleagues.

In 2023, Armenians once again faced a grave crime against humanity: the ethnic cleansing of Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh. More than 100 000 Armenians were forced to flee their homeland. Some may argue that this was their choice. Let me offer you one figure that proves otherwise: more than 60 people died on the road to Armenia. Yes, more than 60 people died in the 21st century, in Europe, while trying to escape the Azerbaijani regime. This does not sound like a choice to me.

The international community may respond that resolutions were adopted condemning these actions, and indeed, some organisations, such as this one, did so, and we are grateful for that.

But what if I tell you that, at this very moment, Azerbaijan is carrying out a cultural genocide in Nagorno-Karabakh. Historic sites, monuments, cemeteries and churches are being destroyed and vandalised as we speak. The most recent example is the Holy Mother of God Cathedral in Stepanakert, which has been completely destroyed in March or April this year.

You may ask why I don't provide the exact date of its demolition. The answer is simple: the only available evidence comes from satellite imagery, as Azerbaijan refuses to allow a UNESCO monitoring mission to access the area.

All of this has happened on our watch. We have no excuses.

I refuse to believe that a single dictator can be more powerful than the entire civilised world. Yet he continues to hold 19 of my compatriots in prisons in Baku, with no intention of releasing them. He continues to occupy more than 200 km² of my country. He continues to withhold information about more than 100 individuals who have been missing since 2020.

And despite the indifference of the world to these tragedies, I stand here as a representative of the Independent Republic of Armenia with a message to those who consider themselves as our enemies: you failed, I survived.

Mr Marko PAVIĆ (Croatia, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

Next is Ms Dumitrina MITREA from Romania.

The floor is yours.

Ms Dumitrina MITREA (Romania, ECPA): Mister President,

Dear colleagues,

I represent in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe both the 20% of voters who voted for the party I belong to, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians, but also those citizens who did not vote for any party at the last elections.

Our duty is to fight for and protect everyone. Please allow me to share with you a few very serious facts about Romania.

250 000 children go to bed every night hungry because their family can't afford basic food. More than 25% of families are considered in a state of social exclusion. Approximately 17% of our children drop out of school. Our government keeps almost half of workers' salaries in labour tax, which means that one in every four people has to borrow money monthly in order to survive. We pay the highest prices for energy despite the fact that we own some of the most important energy resources of Europe.

The current Romanian president admitted many times that we are a country with a high level of corruption. On top of all that, as you all know already, in 2024, an electoral process was annulled entirely. And in 2025, a candidate was banned from running without a court banning him from doing so. The annulment of the presidential election was a coup d'etat but no member of this Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe took any position, even though tomorrow the same thing could happen to any of you.

It has been four years since the European Commission asked us to show solidarity with other states. The question of citizens of my country is when the Council of Europe will show solidarity with Romania, a European Union member state whose democracy was being seriously violated.

Thank you.

Mr Marko PAVIĆ (Croatia, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much. I now call Mr Gusty GRAAS from Luxembourg.

Mr Gusty GRAAS (Luxembourg, ALDE): Thank you, President.

Dear colleagues,

Climate change, armed conflict, economic instability: none of these challenges can be met alone. And yet, at precisely the time when international co-operation is most needed, it is in retreat. The law of the strongest is taking over the international order.

It is in this context that we need to look at the famous *Board of Peace*. Initially presented as a mechanism to support the reconstruction of Gaza, in accordance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 2803, this project quickly changed its nature. President Donald TRUMP himself has said that it could replace the United Nations.

So let's take a look at what it really is. A President for life, with proven autocratic tendencies at home, who runs this organisation alone. A system where that same president chooses the participating states and can exclude them. A fund worth billions, controlled in a way that is opaque to say the least. A centralised power that sets the agenda and makes discretionary political decisions. What is presented to us as multilateralism is the exact opposite.

Behind this project, there is less a vision of peace than a desire for power, an attempt to extend personal influence on a global scale, in defiance of the rules and the international balance. It is a dangerous instrumentalisation of the concept of peace.

Even more worrying is the fact that several member states of the Council of Europe and the European Union have chosen to join this initiative. This should give us cause for alarm. By legitimising a structure that bypasses existing multilateral institutions, these states are weakening Europe's collective position and fragmenting the European voice on the international stage.

Yes, the United Nations is not perfect. Its structure has not evolved sufficiently since 1945. The Security Council no longer reflects the realities of today's world.

But what is the credible alternative? A system dominated by a single actor? A framework without rules, without universal legitimacy, without a balance of power?

Despite its imperfections, the United Nations remains indispensable. It has prevented conflicts, co-ordinated humanitarian responses and defended an order based on law. It was also the United Nations that laid the foundations for international humanitarian law, human rights and disarmament. This is an achievement that we cannot take for granted.

The answer is not to create dubious parallel structures, but to reform the United Nations: strengthen the General Assembly, abolish the right of veto in the Security Council, adapt governance and guarantee funding. And Europe must play a leading role in this.

The *Board of Peace* is not a solution. Rather, it is a worrying symptom of the weakening of multilateralism.

Thank you very much.

Mr Marko PAVIĆ (Croatia, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

I call now Lord Leslie GRIFFITHS from the United Kingdom.

Lord Leslie GRIFFITHS (United Kingdom, SOC): Thank you, President, and greetings to all in this august place, in the hemicycle of the Council of Europe, with its central focus on the values we all cherish.

I want to speak of a country that has a disregard for human rights, has no democratically elected government and knows nothing about the rule of law. I wish to speak about Haiti.

Haiti is in the Caribbean, and you may well think that's a long way from here and perhaps not very relevant. Europe has left its mark on the Caribbean. The languages of the Caribbean are English, French and Dutch, and, of course, French; French, Spanish, Dutch and English. And, of course, the populations of the Caribbean were all put there, or their predecessors, by European powers. So I'd argue that Haiti is very relevant to our concerns here.

Haiti came to birth in 1804 when the armies of Napoleon were overthrown, long before his defeat in the Russian campaign and long before his defeat at the Battle of Waterloo. They were thrown out. But France didn't recognise Haiti until they were prepared to pay an indemnity of, in present values, many billions of dollars. French commercial successes were the result of the payment of this indemnity by the ex-slaves of Haiti in 1804.

And so, Haiti has had a very disastrous and difficult life. The Americans came and showed that they could be just as nasty, robbing Haiti of all its natural resources with an occupation of 30 years at the beginning of the 20th century. It's astonishing to me that Haiti lurks lowest in people's estimation granted the size of the problems elsewhere in the world.

In 2010 – just 16 years ago – more than double the number of people who died under the atomic bombs in Nagasaki and Hiroshima died in five minutes in an earthquake in Haiti. There's no government there. Efforts are very stilted. The United Nations has failed on the several times it's attempted to restore order.

And so I'm glad, since I lived there for 10 years, since I speak both their languages, since I know the people and their history, just to give for a moment the spotlight to a Haiti that nobody else seems to care very much about. I was ordained as a Methodist minister in Port-au-Prince. Our two sons were born in Haiti, with medical doctors and nurses provided from the local population. I love Haiti. I'm fond of Haiti. And I just wish I knew the secret of raising it to the attention of people around the world.

Mr Marko PAVIĆ (Croatia, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

We have another 'blue card' procedure. Mr Sam RUSHWORTH, you have asked for the blue card. I give you the floor.

I already explained the rules in accordance with Article 36.7.4 of the rules of procedure. You have 30 seconds to ask the question.

Mr Sam RUSHWORTH (United Kingdom, SOC): Thank you.

This is a question for Mr Gusty GRAAS.

I thought he gave a very good speech and I would like to give him the opportunity to finish his thoughts and say what he thinks the Council of Europe should do.

Mr Gusty GRAAS (Luxembourg, ALDE): Thank you for your question.

Mr Marko PAVIĆ (Croatia, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Wait, wait wait...

I must first give you the floor. You have 30 seconds to respond in accordance to the rules. The floor is yours.

Mr Gusty GRAAS (Luxembourg, ALDE): Thank you, President.

Yes, the Council of Europe can play a very important role in this issue, because it can speak out against this *Board of Peace*, because what is the *raison d'être* of the *Board of Peace*?

In my view, it really is an attack on the United Nations, which undoubtedly needs to be reformed. But we as the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe can decisively speak out against this new institution created by President Donald TRUMP, which is called *the Board of Peace*.

Mr Marko PAVIĆ (Croatia, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much. We now go ahead with the list of speakers and I call Ms Zdravka BUŠIĆ from Croatia.

The floor is yours.

Ms Zdravka BUŠIĆ (Croatia, EPP/CD): Thank you, Mister President, thank you.

Persecution of Christians today is a sad and painful reality for millions around the globe. Christians are the religious group most widely persecuted for their beliefs worldwide. They are tortured and murdered because of their religious convictions. On a daily basis, we witness heartbreaking scenes that are happening to them because of their beliefs.

We are all familiar with the excruciating images from the Sahel region of West Africa. While they preach peace and love, many of them endure hardship, torture and death. The situation has worsened dramatically in recent years. Numerous international reports and indices clearly demonstrate that. In spite of that, hundreds of thousands of Christians willingly risk their lives to uphold their beliefs.

This reality is more than just statistics. Behind those numbers are faces, families and individual destinies. Entire faith communities are struggling to survive in many places around the world. Their resilience in the face of imminent danger is testament to their convictions. It is high time to take this matter seriously and globally address the persecution of Christians. We have to do our utmost to protect them, their basic rights and fundamental freedoms that many of us take for granted.

Europe, which is built on Judaeo-Christian values, must not stand idly by while Christians worldwide are being discriminated against. Supporting persecuted Christians is not only an act of solidarity, it is also a commitment of our own values and identity. My aim is to raise awareness. It is to appeal and to look closely. Let us face the challenge of our time with open eyes. Let us stand firmly against every form of religious hatred, also including anti-Christian hatred.

Finally, let us work together to ensure that freedom of religion is not merely an old principle on paper, but a lived reality for all.

Thank you for your attention.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much. Next is Ms Cristina Gabriella DUMITRESCU from Romania.

Ms Cristina Gabriella DUMITRESCU (Romania, ECPA): Thank you.

Dear colleagues,

I would like to report a worrying situation regarding the Romanian cultural heritage in Saranda and, at the same time, the respect for the rule of law in Albania.

This concerns the Iorga House, the former Romanian Institute, a symbol of the Romanian cultural presence and the historical ties between Romania and the Aromanian communities in the region. According to the Albanian Academy of Sciences, in 2002, the number of Aromanians was estimated at over 139 000 people. However, the 2023 census indicated drastically reduced figures, contested by the Aromanian minority organisations.

But the central issue remains unresolved: a final and irrevocable judgement of the Court of Justice of Saranda, dated 9 July 2007, recognises the Romanian state's ownership of the Iorga House. And yet, this decision has not been implemented, even after almost two decades.

This situation raises serious questions regarding the respect for final court decisions, the protection of cultural heritage and the rights of national minorities, all of which are fundamental values of the Council of Europe, protected by the European Convention on Human Rights.

I call on the Albanian authorities to ensure the implementation of court decisions, the protection of the Iorga House and the respect of European commitments. I equally call on the European institutions and the Monitoring Committee to follow this case closely.

This is not just a bilateral issue, but one of credibility of the rule of law in Europe.

Thank you.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much. And next is Mr Gerardo GIOVAGNOLI from San Marino.

Mr Gerardo GIOVAGNOLI (San Marino, SOC): Thank you, President.

I am going to speak in Italian about a strategic objective for the whole continent, and also beyond, which manages to encapsulate four other major objectives that we must achieve.

The first is the fight against global warming, I prefer the term global warming to climate change, because the climate is constantly changing, the problem is global warming.

Second: future economic development and jobs.

Third: the strategic resourcefulness of many of our countries.

Fourth: democratic protection.

What am I talking about? I am talking about energy resources. We should have realised a long time ago, and particularly since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, that the question of the supply of energy resources is not just an environmental question, but it is really a strategic question, which then becomes a question of democratic protection. This is due to the fact that these countries, by the way, there were two here that are no longer here – Russia and Azerbaijan –, that are abundant in energy resources, are countries that tend to use this fortunate, natural availability of theirs in a negative strategic sense.

So, first of all, they turn fossil resources directly into weapons, and then they use blackmail at the moment when prices rise, as this is exactly the moment, given the crisis in Hormuz, on the Straits and in the Middle East in general, that everyone feels obliged to choose between better economic conditions and better protection of the democracy of the countries that are invaded, such as Ukraine.

It is time to draw up plans that make us independent of these factors. We are already so far behind on the environmental issue, but also on the democratic one. If we succeed in each country, or in the European context, if there is a strategy, it should be co-ordinated. If each country or continent were to achieve energy independence through renewables, that would reduce costs, it would create more jobs geared to the economy of the future, but above all, in terms of democracy, this would lead to less dependence on those states that act in retaliatory and belligerent ways.

Thank you.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

And Ms Marianne BINDER-KELLER is next on the list of speakers.

Ms Marianne BINDER-KELLER (Switzerland, EPP/CD): Dear Madam President,

Ladies and gentlemen,

"Never again", that was the clear common intention, the declared common will when the Council of Europe was founded. Never again did we want to see dictatorship, terror, oppression, megalomania or war in Europe. Never again the Holocaust, never again the murder of minorities or political dissidents. Never again the horror that emanated from Europe. It was about a common Europe, but this time a free Europe.

The fact that we had to fight for this freedom again became a bitter reality. This freedom is threatened externally by Mr Vladimir PUTIN's insane war, which is not limited to the war for freedom in Ukraine, but also for our freedom. It is about dictatorship versus democracy. It is threatened externally, but also internally, threatened by fake news, propaganda, falsifications of history. Threatened by autocratic apologists hostile to the rule of law and Mr Vladimir PUTIN and war propagandists, but also by fundamentalist groups, such as those clamouring for Sharia law on Europe's streets and spreading vile anti-Semitic hatred. The fact that many Jewish people no longer dare to take to the streets 80 years after the Holocaust is a monstrosity that must concern us all. A betrayal of the promise "never again".

All these fundamentalist movements threaten the rule of law, because they are movements that demand parallel rights, rights for autocrats, but also other rights for the individual. Other rights for women. They are movements that jeopardise human rights and the achievements of the modern constitutional state.

We must not underestimate these movements and stand up to them with civil courage. We must call out fundamentalism and propaganda and create a legal basis in our own constitutional states to leave no room for parallel societies and parallel rights. Because rule of law is as fundamental as our constitutions.

In my opinion, freedom has been fought for too long. Too many lose their lives in the process, for example in Ukraine, for example, on the streets of Iran. Too many have lost their lives fighting for the rule of law. Let us not forget their legacy.

Thank you.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

And now Mr Roland Rino BÜCHEL, also from Switzerland, has the floor.

Mr Roland Rino BÜCHEL (Switzerland, ALDE): Honourable Madam President,

Dear colleagues,

My topic is the protection of citizens in our countries, in the countries of the Council of Europe.

We have had an intensive week. We are now all heading back home and returning to the core tasks for which we were elected in our countries. The various institutions in our home countries have to ensure that decent people are doing as well as possible and that criminal organisations and criminals are doing as badly as possible, so that they can't get away with it.

That was also my concern in the Swiss parliament at the beginning of March.

I dealt with the internet platform of the "Mirotvorets Centre".

According to its own description, the "Mirotvorets Centre" provides information for law enforcement agencies and special services "regarding pro-Russian terrorists, separatists, mercenaries, war criminals and murderers".

On 3 February this year, FIFA President Gianni Infantino was placed on Mirotvorets' death list. The reason for this is a statement Infantino made to the British broadcaster Sky. He suggested a possible re-admission of Russian teams to international FIFA competitions.

I remember President Infantino's speech to this Chamber very well. It was very well attended, there was a lot of interest. It was a remarkable speech. Lots of content, not much blah-blah. It was also a speech that many commentators misunderstood.

Sport brings people together across almost all borders.

Because the world's best-known sports personality by far is Swiss and because the association he presides over, FIFA, is based in Switzerland, I would like to remind you here and now of a question I put to our government in my national parliament.

It was about the "Mirotvorets Centre" and the question of whether the Ukrainian state and the Ukrainian government had anything to do with it.

In its response, my government made it clear that this platform is a non-governmental initiative.

That is important. I was and am happy about that. And I hope that it remains that way. State-fuelled hatred must not be allowed. Not in Ukraine, not in Russia and not in all other Council of Europe countries.

Thank you very much.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): I now call on Ms Gökçe GÖKÇEN from Türkiye.

Ms Gökçe GÖKÇEN (Türkiye, SOC): Dear Madam President,

Dear colleagues,

Today I would like to talk to you about two scandalous statements from the so-called "democratic" world.

Firstly, two days ago we witnessed the European Union's (EU) ignorance of Türkiye. Ms Ursula VON DER LEYEN declared that she considered Türkiye to be a threat in the same way as Russia and China. Türkiye is a candidate country to the European Union. It is also a founding member of the Council of Europe. Yes, it is governed by an anti-democratic regime. But the best friends of this regime and this government are exactly those pragmatic and unprincipled politicians.

And those who oppose Ms Ursula VON DER LEYEN by saying: "The Turkish government will be useful to us" are no different. A European Union that turns a blind eye to human rights violations, just because a government will be useful, is condemned to failure. In a world where security is under threat and the human rights system is constantly being called into question, we need to remember one simple thing: either you choose your principles, or the law of the strongest prevails.

Secondly, the US ambassador to Ankara, Mr Tom BARRACK, made an outrageous statement.

Referring to countries in the region, including Türkiye, he suggested that monarchy would be more suitable, and that authoritarian regimes would be preferable to democracy. Donald Trump's administration needs to understand one thing: in Türkiye, the Republic and democracy were won at great sacrifice.

Our founder, Mr Mustafa Kemal ATATÜRK, opened parliament 106 years ago in the midst of war. Yesterday, the 23 April, we celebrated National Sovereignty and Children's Day. Mr Mustafa Kemal ATATÜRK offered this symbolic day to children all over the world.

Let this be clear to Mr Tom BARRACK and Mr Donald TRUMP's administration: Türkiye is not a country where you can impose a colonial governor or an undemocratic regime without opposition. You cannot insult Türkiye or the peoples of the Middle East in this way.

Those who violate international law in Venezuela, Iran and Palestine have no lessons to teach the world. In Iran, you cannot create a "history of democracy" on the blood of young girls. In Palestine, you cannot create a "story of peace" based on the blood of children.

It is not possible with such hypocrisy.

Ladies and gentlemen, I shall conclude my speech with the words of Mr Mustafa Kemal ATATÜRK: "Peace in the land, peace in the world."

Thank you.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you and now I call Mr Alexander Van HATTEM from the Netherlands.

Mr Alexander Van HATTEM (Netherlands, ECPA): Thank you, Chair.

I will make some remarks about the freedom of speech and academic freedom in the Netherlands.

The University of Amsterdam Economic Faculty cancelled this week an interview with Flemish conservative politician Mr Tom VAN GRIEKEN, the president of one of Belgium's biggest parties. Because of security threats and so-called other reasons, this interview was cancelled. He was invited by the students to debate at their Universiteit Van Amsterdam's (UVA) Room for Discussion, which is a part of their academic freedom, to have exchanges of views with politicians and thinkers of all political groups and ideas. That's academic freedom and freedom of speech.

These human rights are under threat at this university because it's not an incident. Not only was Mr Tom VAN GRIEKEN, as a democratic-chosen representative, cancelled – which is a real shame – but also others were cancelled in the last two years at UVA's Room for Discussion, under pressure of radical left activists like Extinction Rebellion and Antifa. And because of radical anti-Israel protests, Jewish students don't feel safe anymore at this university. Unacceptable anti-Semitism in a city which was hit so hard during the Holocaust.

In the last two years, the following speakers were cancelled or attacked at UVA's Room for Discussion: the Dutch Defence Minister Mr Ruben BREKELMAN's speech was cancelled after 15 minutes because of a radical left protest; NATO top military chief Mr Rob BAUER was unable to speak because of radical left protests; an interview with Dutch Defence Minister Ms Kaja OLLONGREN was cancelled under pressure of protest; an interview with the former Royal Dutch Shell director Mr Jeroen VAN DER VEER was cancelled due to protest; and due to protest, an interview with Amsterdam Mayor Ms Femke HALSEMA was replaced to another location. And earlier, the psychologist Mr Jordan PETERSON was attacked at this event.

There is a double standard in the Netherlands. The radical left-wing activists like Antifa and Extinction Rebellion have all the freedom to attack everyone they don't like. And at the same time, anti-asylum centre protests are knocked down very tough by the Dutch police. Freedom of speech and freedom of protest are not equal for everyone. So I would ask this Assembly of the Council of Europe to pay attention to the freedom of speech and academic freedom at the Dutch universities.

And I would ask especially your support for Mr Tom VAN GRIEKEN as an elected representative, when freedom of speech is under pressure and our democracy is under pressure.

Thank you very much.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

And the last one on the speaking list is Mr Hasan TAÇOY from Cyprus, please.

Mr Hasan TAÇOY (Cyprus* [Resolution 1376 (2004)]): Madam President,

Dear colleagues,

Cyprus, the "Island of Aphrodite", holds a unique place in history and international relations.

The Republic of Cyprus was established under the 1959 London and Zurich Agreements by Greece, Türkiye and the United Kingdom as guarantor powers.

Its constitution was drafted in accordance with the founding agreements and entered into force in 1960. However, the constitutional order was forcefully disrupted by Greek Cypriots in 1963 and Turkish Cypriots were excluded from all state institutions. The representation of the Republic of Cyprus in this Assembly was effectively suspended for almost 20 years.

In July 1974, a coup d'État was carried out in Cyprus, backed by Greece.

This esteemed Assembly, in its Resolution 573 (1974), condemned the coup d'État in Cyprus, and it was also acknowledged that the failure to reach a diplomatic settlement led Türkiye to intervene in accordance with its rights and obligations under the 1960 Treaty of Guarantee.

Since 1974, a series of comprehensive settlement proposals have been put forward under the auspices of the United Nations to resolve the Cyprus issue.

If we look at what has taken place since then:

The 1977 and 1979 High Level Agreements.

The 1987 initiative of Mr Javier PÉREZ DE CUÉLLAR, accepted by the Turkish Cypriot side but rejected by the Greek Cypriot side.

The 1990 "Set of Ideas", by Mr Boutros BOUTROS-GHALI, again accepted by the Turkish Cypriots but rejected by the Greek Cypriots.

The 2004 Annan Plan, in which Turkish Cypriots voted yes by 65%, while Greek Cypriots rejected it by 75%. Today marks the 22nd anniversary since the Annan Plan was put in simultaneous referenda.

I will not elaborate on the many other attempts, including the most recent one in Crans-Montana in 2017, where the Greek Cypriot side left the negotiating table.

Dear colleagues,

For decades, opportunities for a just and lasting settlement have been missed.

What is needed today is not another process to be exhausted, but a genuine commitment to fairness, balance, and political courage. Equality between the two sides is not a concession, it is a necessity.

Without equality, there can be no trust. Without trust, there can be no sustainable solution.

Let us, therefore, act with responsibility and determination, and finally bring this long-standing issue to a just and lasting conclusion.

Thank you.

Progress report of the Bureau and the Standing Committee (continued)

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

That concludes the list of speakers, and the debate is closed.

The next item on today's agenda is the continuation of the debate on the Progress Report of the Bureau and the Standing Committee (Document 16377 Addendum 3).

The Bureau has proposed several references to Committees, set out in Addendum 3.

These references must be submitted for ratification by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in accordance with Rule 26.3. Any objections successfully raised mean those references will be referred back to the Bureau.

Are there any objections to these references?

There are no objections; *the references are approved.*

I now propose that the other decisions in the Progress Report (Document 16377 Addendum 3) be ratified. Are there any objections?

There are no objections; *the progress report is approved.*

Our next business is to consider the changes proposed in the membership of Committees. These are set out in document Commissions (2026) 04, Addendum 3.

Are the proposed changes in the membership of the Committee on Rules, Ethics and Immunities agreed to?

They are agreed to.

We have now come to the end of our business.

I would like to thank all members of the Assembly, particularly rapporteurs and Chairs of Committees, for their hard work during this Part-Session.

We have now come to the end of our business.

I would like to thank all members of the Assembly, particularly Rapporteurs and Chairs of Committees, for their hard work during this Part-Session.

Mr Bertrand BOUYX

Mr Mogens JENSEN

Lord Carwyn JONES

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI

Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA-FEDORENKO

Mr Sigurður Helgi PÁLMASSON

Mr Marko PAVIĆ

Mr Ruben RUBINYAN

Ms Kadri TALI

Dear colleagues,

I would now like to pay a special tribute to one of our Assembly's most distinguished staff members. Ms Annick SCHNEIDER – sitting over there – Senior Administrative Assistant in the Table Office, is completing her final session after 32 years of service to our Organisation, 23 of which have been spent with us in the Assembly.

Dear Annick, the oldest among us will remember you from the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy and later from the Office of the Secretary General of the Assembly. It was then in the service of the Table Office, Information Management and Events Department that our members came to appreciate your great competence, your unwavering commitment, your immense availability and your profound sense of responsibility. You have demonstrated remarkable dedication, often discreet but always decisive. Your presence has been a guiding light, your experience a treasure, and your exemplary conduct a source of reassurance for all those who have had the privilege of working alongside you.

As you prepare to turn the page and embark on a new chapter in your life, we wish to express our gratitude and thank you for having worked so effectively towards the success of our plenary sessions and major events. On behalf of the members of our Assembly, and on my own behalf, of course, as well, I wish you a retirement that matches your career: rich, peaceful and deeply fulfilling. And to be honest, I have to have a look into the pension system because to retire at an age when you look like you, there must be a secret I really would like to know! So we should copy this pension system!

So, I wish you all the best for your future. Please, Annick.

[applause]

I would like to thank the staff, everybody, the technical personnel, the interpreters who have worked hard to make this session a success, and of course, all of you.

The Third part of the 2026 Session will be held from 22 to 26 June 2026.

I declare the Second part of the 2026 Session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe closed.

And the sitting is closed.

Thank you.